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CHAPTER II

THE SYSTEM OF KINSHIP AND AFFINITY[1]

1. DESCENT GROUPS

AMONG the Ruanda people, Tutsi as well as Hutu, the social principle of descent was agnatic. When any informant is asked who are his ascendants, he always answers by giving the names of his father, his paternal grandfather, his paternal great grandfather up to some male ancestor beyond whom he is unable to go. He does not mention his mother nor any of her ascendants.

Questions on the actual groupings founded on this principle and their functions elicit less unanimous and clear answers. The reason is that kinship groups have undoubtedly undergone a slow process of change in several respects during the Tutsi occupation of the country. What we know of its history[2] is quite sufficient to convince us that there has been a progressive territorial expansion under one dynasty of rulers together with an intensification of the

[1] In order to make clear the connotations of the main concepts used in this chapter, here are a few definitions:

Ego's *kin* are his socially recognized relatives to whom he is connected through parent-child and-or sibling links. *Consanguineal* and *cognatic* relatives are used as synonyms for kin.

Ego's *affines* are his socially recognized relatives to whom he is connected through a marriage link. This link may be the first traced from Ego (the affines are then Ego's spouse's kin) or the kinship link may be the first one traced (the affines are then Ego's kin's spouse).

Ego's *patrilineal* or *agnatic* relatives are those of his kin who descend by male links from the same male ancestor as Ego.

Ego's *matrilineal* or *uterine* relatives are those of his kin who descend by female links from the same ancestress as Ego.

Ego's *cross-line* relatives are those of his kin who are neither patrilineally nor matrilineally related to him.

Ego's *paternal* or *patrilateral* relatives are those of his kin to whom he is connected through his father.

Ego's *maternal* or *matrilateral* relatives are those of his kin to whom he is connected through his mother.

To sum up:

Relatives
- are *kin* (or consanguineal relatives or cognates) who can be distinguished as
  - 1. patrilineal (or agnatic)
  - 2. matrilineal (or uterine)
  - 3. cross-line
- of as
  - 1. paternal (or patrilateral)
  - 2. maternal (or matrilateral)
- and *affines* who can be distinguished as
  - 1. kin of Ego's spouse
  - 2. spouses of Ego's kin.

[2] See for instances, Pagès, 1933.

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61 178 642 121 degrees of control exerted by that central authority on the territory. These processes have necessarily had an impact on the autonomy and social significance of Hutu and Tutsi kinship groups, on their connexion with a particular tract of land, and on their functions. We shall not be concerned here with any reconstruction of these processes but only with them as they existed in the immediate pre-European days. It should be borne in mind, however, that this was the period of an evolution. This explains the sometimes confused picture given by some informants.

(a) Inzu, ubwoko, umulyango

613 Hutu and Tutsi recognized a patrilineal kin group (*inzu*)[3] which included all who could actually trace their agnatic relationship through usually no more than four or five ascendent genealogical links to an ancestor recognized as the original ancestor of the group.

Members of the inzu of a male Ego were: Br, Si, Fa, FaSi, FaBr, FaBrSo, FaBrDa, FaFa, FaFaBr, FaFaSi, FaFaBrSo, FaFaBrDa, FaFaBrSoSo, FaFaBrSoDa.[4]

Ego's sororal nephews and nieces (SiSo, SiDa) and his paternal cross-cousins (FaSiSo and FaSiDa) did not belong to his *inzu*. However they participated in some of its activities if they lived [591] with their maternal uncle (Ego), which happened when the bride-wealth for their mother (Ego's Si) had not been entirely paid.

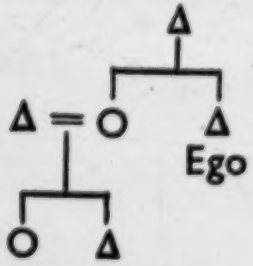

Diagram A.

Other generations above Ego's (that of FaFaFa, &c.) or under his (that of SoSoSo, &c.), were not necessarily included in Ego's

[3] *Inzu* means also hut.
[4] I follow the symbolization system used by Murdock, 1949.

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The most important *biru* were the three to whom the king communicated the name of his successor and the recommendations he wanted them to transmit to the new king later. There were about a dozen main *biru* offices. These important *biru* had assistants from their lineages, prospective successors whom they gradually trained in order that the oral traditions should not be lost.

Biru had to memorize secret rules, governing for instance the order according to which queens would be chosen from different descent groups, the ritual to observe in case of spreading of cattle disease, lack of abundance of rain, warlike ceremonies, celebrations of the sorghum harvests, &c.

The *biru* institution safeguarded the interests of the great Tutsi descent groups. This function appears clearly in the determination made for several reigns in advance of the secondary lineages and clans from which the queens should be successively chosen. The *biru*, as representatives of their kinship groups had, as it were, established the order in which the interests of different clans and lineages would be favoured in turn.

No one *mwiru* knew the entire body of customs. That knowledge was divided into parts, the remembering of each being entrusted to a *mwiru*, that is to say a descent group, as the office was hereditary. In this way it may be said that the exclusive knowledge of a part of the most important Ruanda ritual had become almost the property of each great Tutsi descent group.

A second function of the *biru* institution was to secure the continuity and the prevalence of the tradition which could have been endangered by the very considerable powers of the king. That traditional body was not unlike a constitution in a modern state and the *biru* institution could be said to have had a role similar to that of a supreme court judging whether a new rule is compatible with the fundamental charter of the country. Of course they had explicitly neither such a task nor such institutionalized means to prevent the mwami from establishing new rules, but the disapproval of an innovation by the *biru* was not to be taken lightly as they represented the great Tutsi kinship groups.

To assess more exactly the function of this institution, one should know more about it. The present day *biru* are still very reluctant to provide information and still less to let it be published, in spite of the encouragement to do so that they receive from the king.[28]

[28] See Kagame, 1947a.